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Promoting tourism in Iran is not one of the Ayatollah's priorities

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When most people think of a trip they'd like to take, they imagine a quiet week on Nantucket or a luxurious Club Med vacation in the Caribbean.

For me, Iran was one place I'd always dreamed of visiting.

It is a vast, fascinating, and diverse country — from the grasslands bordering on the Soviet Union to the shores of the Persian Gulf, where women wear the beak-like masks of Arabia; from the religious city of Qom to Shiraz, the classical city of roses and nightingales — the poetic soul of Iran.



I wanted to meet the Iranian people and see how life had changed since the 1979 revolution. And I longed to visit Iran's wealth of historical and archaeological sites.

I had my first foretaste of life in the Islamic Republic when I went to get a visa at the Iranian Interests Section of the Algerian Embassy in Washington. The receptionist immediately told me to lower my veil, and I had to have my photos retaken wearing a *hijab* (head covering). It took four months of waiting before my visa was approved by the authorities in Tehran.

It is easier for Europeans to travel to Iran, than for me, an American. Although I didn't see another foreign traveler during my three months there, I later met several Europeans in Pakistan who had come through Iran on transit visas. Japanese visitors do not even need visas for short trips.

Promoting tourism in Iran is clearly not one of Ayatollah Khomeini's priorities.

"The Shah encouraged tourism as part of his effort to put Iran on the map internationally. We used to get hundreds of thousands of tourists a year," explained a former employee of the Ministry of Information and Tour-

ism under the previous regime. "But this government [the Islamic Republic] sees it as interference in Iranian affairs.

They're trying to cultivate "religious tourism" instead — pilgrims coming to visit the holy cities of Mashhad and Qom."

Although Iran's pre-Islamic past is now in strong disfavor with the ruling Islamic clerics, the ancient historical sites have not been closed or destroyed.

There were reports after the revolution that some religious leaders wanted to level Persepolis, the world-

famous ruins of the capital of ancient Persia. But today, Iranian tourists — including Iranian Army soldiers on leave and even clerics — still stroll along the beautiful columns and carved staircases.

However, most references to Iran's 2,500-year-old monarchic tradition have been obliterated or played down in favor of the new order. In a museum, a famous painting of the 18th-century conqueror Nadir Shah, is pointedly surrounded by pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Even mythical kings are not exempt: Name plaques have been torn off the many paintings of Rustam, hero of the Iranian epic, the Shah Namah (Book of Kings).

The Khomeini government has been most intent on eradicating the memory of the last shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who was ousted from power in 1979. The ubiquitous "Pahlavi" streets, hospitals, and even a port city on the Caspian Sea, were renamed for Khomeini and other leaders of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

But paradoxically, the Shah's palaces have not been harmed. In fact, they are open for public viewing.

On holidays, long lines form outside northern Tehran's Niavaran Palace rather than the Peoples' Palace Museum.

Guides explain every detail: the exact dimensions of the enormous Persian rugs, from which European country each of the furnishings was imported, in which room the Shah entertained heads of state, in which room guests sat for appetizers before dinner.

Nothing has been touched since the Shah left Iran in February 1979, flying by helicopter from this palace to Tehran airport. Except for the tarnish on the royal silverware, one would think he was away on a quick vacation and was returning shortly.

The table in the formal dining room is set with china and crystal goblets all bearing the imperial crest. The Shah's pyjamas (also with the imperial crest) are laid out on his bed, and the phone still sits on the desk in his office.

However, lest anyone get carried away with frivolous thoughts and forget the realities of the intervening years, there is a row of black and white photos of crying children and bombed-out villages at the Iraqi warfront.

Reminders of the five-year-old war with Iraq are everywhere.

Large rockets are poised in launching position at major intersections with signs that read, "War, War Until Victory."

Dinghies lined up bow to stern in the center of Isfahan's famous avenue Chahar Bagh (Four Gardens) have replaced the flowers of earlier days. An Isfahani explained that these donations for the war effort were to remind citizens to contribute.

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Almost all signs are now in Farsi by law. Advertising has been eliminated and replaced with religious, revolutionary, or war slogans. Instead of "Drink Coke," one might see "Wear hijab" or, "We are all your soldiers, Khomeini. We are waiting for your orders, Khomeini."

So that the government's pet themes are not lost on visiting foreigners, however, some signs appear in English, like this one at a toll station entering Tehran: "Overwhelm the United States of America! — Imam Khomeini."

The lack of crowds and hawkers and the easy transportation made Iran a tourist's paradise for me.

Intercity travel is efficient and inexpensive on Mercedes-type buses. To go about 600 miles costs a mere \$9.

Determined to make the most of my time, I frequently traveled these long distances at night and went sightseeing during the day.

Some effects of the revolution are apparent at the central bus station in Tehran from where the 15 major bus companies, which were nationalized after the revolution, operate.

Instead of comic books and fashion magazines for travel reading, a bookstand entitled "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Young Children and Adults" sells Islamic philosophical writings as well as educational materials for all ages.

Women traveling alone are always seated together at the front of the bus. Each passenger is given a plastic cup, and an attendant comes around regularly to pour water. Invariably my seat companion would press on me a portion of any food she had, from pistachios to hard-boiled eggs.

For getting around cities, the Iranian share-taxi system is ideal. The rider flags down one going in his general direction and tells the driver when to stop, paying for whatever distance he has gone. The atmosphere is friendly: Iranians, both men and women alike, greet the driver as they get in and converse pleasantly with the other occupants.

The only problem is knowing which are taxis, since the vast majority of cars are Paykans — cars that are locally assembled from British-made kits. Once, a car stopped and when I said, "The archaeological museum?" the driver nodded and gestured for me to get in. The women next to me smiled and we exchanged pleasantries in pidgin Farsi. When I got out at the museum to pay the fare, he said, "No money, not taxi. This my family."

They all smiled and waved as they drove off.

Last in a series of occasional articles. The writer's name is withheld to protect future travel plans.

Previous articles in this series appeared July 25th and Aug. 5, 6, 7, and 27.